# Plan would expand benefits to city employees, including same-sex couples

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A political advocacy group is reviving a controversial proposal to expand benefits to Colorado Springs city employees, including same-sex couples.

Barb Van Hoy, executive director of the Citizens Project, announced this morning that the group is lobbying city officials to give employees "plus one" health coverage.

The plan will "help Colorado Springs begin to catch up with the rest of the state and nation in expanding employee benefits to diverse families, including gay and lesbian families," Van Hoy told an audience of about 500 during the group's annual Creating Community Breakfast, held at Mr. Biggs event center.

"We are building on previous efforts to allow city employees to add one family member to their health plan," she said.

At least three council members in the audience - Scott Hente, Jan Martin and Vice Mayor Larry Small - said they would support the proposal.

"I think it's important for this city to demonstrate to the community that we believe that everybody is equal when it comes to benefits from the city," Martin said.

Councilmen Jerry Heimlicher and Bernie Herpin were also in the audience, but they could not immediately be reached for comment.

The proposal, which would also cover unmarried heterosexual couples, would increase the pool of participants in the city's health insurance program. But Martin said it would reduce the number of people needing to go to the emergency room.

"It's revenue-neutral," she said. "It's the right thing to do, and I really do believe this is our year to put it into place."

Martin said she believes a majority of the City Council will support the proposal.

"We really believe that the community is better positioned to support this initiative today," she said.

Small said he sponsored a similar proposal in 2003. It was voted down on a 5-4 vote, he said.

"I'm very interested in seeing it brought back by a group of citizens," Small said.

Hente said he supported the proposal the last time.

"With no cost to the taxpayers, I see this as being able to provide a benefit to our employees, again, at no cost to our taxpayers," Hente said. "Anytime we can provide a benefit and it doesn't have a cost, why would I not want to do that?"